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Fixing the Volatile - studio vocal performance techniques

Mike Howlett

London College of Music, Thames Valley University and
Cardiff College of Creative Industries, University of Glamorgan
mike.howlett@tvu.ac.uk

Abstract

Fixing the Volatile - studio vocal performance techniques. The process of compiling a studio vocal performance from many takes can often result in the performer producing a new complete performance once this new "best of" assemblage is heard back. This paper investigates the ways that the physical process of recording can alter vocal performance techniques, and in particular, the establishing of a definitive melodic and rhythmic structure.

Drawing on his many years of experience as a commercially successful producer, including the attainment of a Grammy award, the author will analyse the process of producing a "credible" vocal performance in depth, with specific case studies and examples. The question of authenticity in rock and pop will also be discussed and, in this context, the uniqueness of the producer's role as critical arbiter – what gives the producer the authority to make such performance evaluations?

Techniques for creating conditions in the studio that are conducive to vocal performances, in many ways a very unnatural performance environment, will be discussed, touching on areas such as the psycho-acoustic properties of headphone mixes, the avoidance of intimidatory practices, and a methodology for inducing the perception of a "familiar" acoustic environment.

1 Introduction

This paper begins with an analysis of production techniques applied to vocal performance, and particularly, the common practice of compiling a complete recorded "performance" from several (and often, many) separate performances. In the process a number of questions are raised: The conditions under which the performer is constrained to deliver meaningful performances; the role of the producer as critical arbiter in the evaluation of the performance; and the extent to which the selection process defines the manifestation of the creative inspiration that is at the heart of the recording process.

2 Recording the vocal

In many ways a recording studio is a most unnatural environment in which to achieve an inspired performance. Many artists tell of what is known as "red light syndrome" – the intimidating effect that pressing the record button can have – by the implied demand that now is the moment to produce the best that the artist can give. Although it might be thought that performing live before a large audience is more intimidating, there is a distance from the stage that allows a level of detachment. Small errors pass quickly as the song progresses – there is no time for reflection as the imperative of the moment moves relentlessly along the timeline of the composition. In the studio every detail will be analysed, as if in an 'aural' microscope, the pitch of a specific note, the timbre of the voice, the timing and dynamics – all are considered and compared against an as yet undefined paradigm. Enabling the performer to overcome these pressures is a significant part of the producer's role, and especially so with vocalists.

2.1 A familiar place

Many producers use techniques such as applying specific equalization to the headphone mix, and adding reverb and delays to create an aural atmosphere the singer feels comfortable with – Humberto Gatico describes such a practice when recording Celine Dion¹. I developed a process that has proved effective, which is to make the choice of microphone – usually by trying several from a list of microphones known from experience to provide a good result² – and set the compression level, and equalisation, establish the headphone mix and sound preferred by the singer (and sometimes the level, because too much volume can make a singer perform flat, and too little can make them sing sharp), then keep those settings on a specific channel of the desk so that at anytime everything is ready for an

¹ Massey, 2000, p.64

² Neumann U87, U47, M49, TLM 103, AKG 414

attempt at the performance. These attempts are usually kept relatively short, but can happen whenever the moment seems appropriate. In this way the vocalist returns often to what becomes a familiar environment – the sound in the headphones, the position in the studio, and the relationship with the producer through the glass – through repetition all become a comfortable place. By removing the imperative to deliver a final take the artist feels less pressured and can feel able to test ideas and ways of treating the song. Because the human voice is an inconstant thing, some days the actual tone and timbre is better than other days – this could be the consequence of a heavy night's drinking, or the onset of a cold, the weather - any number of subtle factors can combine to produce a quality that wasn't there before. By keeping the vocal setup always ready, such times can be captured with a minimum of delay, and that elusive thing, magic, with it.

2.2 Compilation - crystallization

Of course, not all vocalists are equal, and sometimes a performance must be constructed from the collected efforts. Even very capable singers have good days and off days. [Even a singer as competent as Joan Armatrading was pleased to use this method.] The process of compilation is used frequently to assemble the best available in the circumstances. But what surprised me, and at first was rather annoying, was that, having spent as much as six or eight hours assembling a complete and relatively flawless performance, often the singer would plead, or insist, on another attempt. Even more surprising was that these subsequent performances would sometimes surpass the painstakingly assembled compilation. What I came to understand was that the assembled performance had shown the artist a way of treating the song that existed previously only in fragments. This new assemblage was, in effect, a crystallization of many potentials. The vocal performance was being defined and reified. The melody and the structure will have been loosely sketched, but all those subtle details – the particular phrasing of a line, an emotional emphasis on a word, all the minute details that go to make a powerful rendition – these things are the stuff of great recordings. And there is a related factor, which I think is the result of familiarity with a song. Even fairly poor amateur singers can knock out a passable rendition of a well-known standard, at a karaoke night, or at least in the shower, because they can hear it in their mind and know where it's supposed to go. For a new song, often not yet tested by repeated live performance, a process of definition is necessary, and having been established, the singer has a better understanding of the song's potential, and can be inspired to an even better performance.

2.3 Evaluation

At the core of this process - of establishing a definitive rendition - is the constant application of evaluation. To choose which particular line, or even word, is the right one to use is the producer's job, but what directs that choice? Some of these choices are largely functional – a word or phrase may drift in pitch, or sit uncomfortably in the rhythm of the track - but often it is simply that one particular rendition moves you – an emotional response is caused. And there is an assumption made that, if it moves you, it can move other listeners. For the producer, trusting this emotional response is a quintessential function. The confidence to say, "I like this one", is at the heart of a producer's role. The same critical function is applied at virtually every stage of the recording process – from the decision that a particular backing track performance has the right feeling and energy, to the approval of a guitar solo, and, of course, the sound of the various instruments coming through the monitors, all come back to the producer, who must make that judgment. Of course, many producers will involve the artist in this process, and many artists are "difficult" – the more talented artists are usually especially so – and here conflict can arise. Here the producer's powers of persuasion are tested, the commitment to one's instinctive judgment, and sensibility to the most productive outcome – because sometimes it is more productive to defer to the artists own critical functions. This process of interaction can determine the successful completion of the entire project.

Ultimately, this function of critical arbiter applies to the whole production. A production is a realization of a creative concept – hence the French term for record producer: *réalisateur*. Every recording aspires to be the *definitive* version – or at least, a definitive version. This is not to exclude creative reinterpretations such as "I Shot the Sheriff" by Bob Marley, and later, Eric Clapton, which become autonomous definitions – validated by their integrity. I would argue that the later work contributes new meanings through arrangement and performance – production, in other words. But the interesting question remains: against what template or cultural understanding are these judgments made? In numerous accounts by producers, imprecise explanations are found – Tony Visconti calls it "gut feeling", Butch Vig on Garbage's "Stupid Girl" says, "[W]e thought, 'This sounds cool.'" ³ Simon Frith's excellent, and now standard, work, "Performing Rites", grapples heroically with this question, challenging the sociological argument that our preferences, our emotional responses, to music are conditioned by class and culture, though, of course, there is no doubt some evidence to support this view. Frith makes the case that "[p]op tastes do

³ Zak, 2001, p.192

not just derive from our socially constructed identities; they also help shape them.”⁴ It follows, then, that the producer is both a product of his or her cultural and social context, and also a creative agent.

Frith also quotes a fan of 80’s rapper Spoonie Gee: “Listening to Spoonie is like hearing my own feelings,” and Evan Eisenberg, in *The Recording Angel*, quotes his friend Nina saying, “When I play a record... it’s as though someone else were expressing my feelings.”⁵ Again, the producer as interpreter, as critical arbiter, is relying on the commonality of his sensibilities, the reliability of which will be tested in the cultural marketplace: if enough listeners agree with these choices the recording becomes a hit.

2.4 Authority

The question of authority in the recording context is answered in the case of a producer with “form” – a track record of hits – by the simple fact of proven results. A group, or an artist usually choose a producer by reputation, and are generally content to accept this authority on that basis, though instances do arise during the process of recording that can raise a challenge to this. Here the producer must rely on the power of personality and reasoned discourse. But for an inexperienced producer there are different criteria. There are typically two routes by which one claims the role of producer – the engineer and the musician. In my case, I had been a recording artist in a group with critical credibility, though minimal commercial success – Gong. Certainly, my long career as a musician – playing in groups from the age of 12 – gave me a language and syntax with which to engage the artist. Being able to “speak the language” is a hugely advantageous tool – Thomas Porcello, of Vassar College, presented a fascinating paper at the ARP at Edinburgh University last year [2006] called: “So what kind of sound are you after here?: Speech-about-sound in the recording studio context,” in which he reported on his year hanging out in studios recording the terminology and referential discourses used by producers, engineers and artists to articulate the kinds of sounds and musical parts desired. Common expressions tended to be of the referential kind: I want the snare to sound like that record by The Cure, for example. This language of common “resonances” is considered in fine detail by Albin Zak III in “The Poetics of Rock”. For a producer this shared terminology is a significant part of the process of establishing respect, of acquiring authority. Though, in the end, it comes down to the personal relationship a producer develops with the artist – like an evangelist, a producer must

make the artist believe that he, or she, has the ability to make that volatile concept, a song, a fixed reality.

3. Conclusion

This paper began with a consideration of various processes for attaining a “credible” vocal performance in the studio. A method of establishing a “familiar” environment for the artist has been proposed as a means of achieving this aim. The further process of “crystallization” – of defining a musical concept in a recording – was described and proposed as the primary ambition of a production. This raised the practice of critical evaluation and the question of the producer’s authority in making those judgements. But it is important not to forget the consequences of these methodologies. A record has the power to articulate the unique condition of a generation – although the lyrical content, the subject matter, may be a constant – every generation comes into the world with preconditions – the genetic imperative to breed, the conflicting demands of social expedience and cultural constraints. These things need to be restated in the clothing of the age. Each generation seems to require a fresh construct that feels like their own. Why this should be so is the subject of ontology. But to achieve the realisation of a song that speaks to the heart – this is the art of record production.

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⁴ Frith, 1996 [1998], p.276

⁵ Frith, 1996 [1998], p.271